



Checklist: Basic Tenets of Emergency Risk Communication

- ✓ **Don't over reassure.** The objective is not to placate, but to engender, calm concern.
- ✓ **Acknowledge uncertainty.** Offer what you know versus what you don't know. Show your distress and acknowledge your audience's distress regarding the uncertainty of the situation. "It must be awful to hear we can't answer that question right now . . ."
- ✓ **Express that a process is in place** to learn more. "We have a system (plan, process) to help us respond (find answers, etc)."
- ✓ **Give anticipatory guidance.** If you are aware of future negative outcomes, let people know what to expect. Example: side effects of antibiotics. If it's going to be bad, tell them.
- ✓ **Be regretful, not defensive.** Say "we are sorry . . ." or "we feel terrible that . . ." when acknowledging misdeeds or failures from the agency. Don't use "regret," which sounds like you're preparing for a lawsuit.
- ✓ **Acknowledge people's fears.** Don't tell people they shouldn't be afraid. They are and they have a right to their fears. Don't tell them they are idiots for their misplaced fear; acknowledge that it's normal, human to be frightened. They aren't experts.
- ✓ **Acknowledge the shared misery.** Some people will be less frightened than they are miserable, feeling hopeless and defeated. Acknowledge the misery of a catastrophic event and then help move them toward hope for the future through the actions of your agency and actions they too can take.
- ✓ **Express wishes.** "I wish we knew more." "I wish our answers were more definitive."
- ✓ **Stop trying to allay panic.** Panic is less common than imagined. Panic doesn't come from bad news, but from mixed messages. If the public is faced with conflicting recommendations and expert advice, they are left with no credible source to turn to for help. That level of abandonment opens the door to charlatans and mass poor judgment. Candor protects your credibility and reduces the possibility of panic, because your messages will ring true.
- ✓ **At some point, be willing to address the "what if" questions.** These are the questions every person is thinking about and wants to hear answers from experts. It's often impractical to fuel "what ifs" when the crisis is contained and not likely to affect wide numbers of people; it is reasonable to answer "what ifs" if the "what if" could happen and people need to be emotionally prepared for it. However, if you do not answer the "what if" questions, someone with much less at risk regarding the outcome of the response will answer them for you. If you are not prepared to address "what ifs," you lose credibility and the opportunity to frame the "what if" questions with reason and valid recommendations.





- ✓ **Give people things to do.** In an emergency, some actions communicated are directed at victims, persons exposed or persons who have the potential to be exposed. However, those who do not need to take immediate action will be engaging in “vicarious rehearsal” regarding those recommendations and may need substitute actions of their own to ensure they do not prematurely act on recommendations not meant for them. Simple actions in an emergency will give people back a sense of control and will help to keep them motivated to stay tuned to what is happening (versus denial, where they refuse to acknowledge the possible danger to themselves and others) and prepare them to take action when directed to do so. When giving them something to do, give them a choice of actions matched to their level of concern. Give a range of responses, a minimum response, a maximum response, and a recommended middle response.
- ✓ **Ask more of people.** Perhaps the most important role of the spokesperson is to ask people to bear the risk with you. People can tolerate considerable risk, especially voluntary risk. If you acknowledge the risk, its severity, complexity and legitimate people’s fears, you can then ask the best of them, to bear the risk during the emergency and work toward solutions. As a spokesperson, especially one who is on the ground and at some self risk, you can model the appropriate behavior, not false bonhomie, but true willingness to go on with life as much as possible, to make reasonable choices for yourself and your family. Don’t be glib, but be stalwart. Your determination to see it through will help others who are looking for role models to help them face the risk too. Americans have great heart, a sense of selflessness, and a natural competitiveness. Sparking those inherent attributes will help people cope with uncertainty, fear and misery.

Empathy, expertise, dedication and follow-through are the elements that build trust. As a spokesperson, you need to quickly build trust and credibility if you hope to have your public health recommendations acted on by the public.

